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## Peer assisted learning and the creation of a “learning community” for first year law students

Amanda Zacharopoulou<sup>a\*</sup> and Catherine Turner<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*School of Law, University of Ulster, Shore Road, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT37 0AT, Northern Ireland;* <sup>b</sup>*Durham Law School, Durham University, Palatine Centre, Stockton Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK*

This paper will explore the impact of peer assisted learning on student transition and the creation of a “learning community” by way of a case study of first year law programmes at the University of Ulster. A review of first year law programmes was undertaken to identify whether student expectations were being met and how the first year experience could be enhanced. Students were clearly having difficulty making the transition to university and coping with the independent nature of a law degree. Findings led to the implementation of a peer support scheme for new first year law students in the form of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) which were used to encourage students on the undergraduate LLB programmes at Ulster to support each other in their learning. The PASS scheme was evaluated and this paper highlights the value of peer support particularly in relation to the transition process and increasing student confidence in their subject.

### Introduction

In 1997 the Dearing Report<sup>1</sup> advocated that the goal of universities should be to “inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment”.<sup>2</sup> Just over 10 years later, Ramsden’s Report on *The Future of Higher Education Teaching and Student Experience* asserted that within the UK “the quality of our students’ experiences is among the best in the world”.<sup>3</sup> However, several challenges were identified in the Ramsden Report, not least

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [a.zacharopoulou@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:a.zacharopoulou@ulster.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup>UK National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Committee), *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the National Committee* (London, HMSO, 1997) (the Dearing Report).

<sup>2</sup>Dearing Report, *supra* n. 1, ch. 5, para. 5.11.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Ramsden, *The Future of Higher Education Teaching and the Student Experience* (2008), see <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/BISCore/corporate/docs/H/hedebate-ramsdn.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2012).

the challenge of how to respond to evolving student expectations and how to maintain and enhance student engagement. Research suggests that students appear to have difficulty in making the transition from a highly structured learning environment into one where they must take responsibility for their own progress.<sup>4</sup> Students are often unaware of what study at university will entail in terms of academic workload, contact hours, independent learning and research. Indeed the Ramsden Report claimed that “a greater variety of students has inevitably increased the *range* of expectations”.<sup>5</sup> This diversity in the student population unavoidably poses additional challenges for universities and their staff. If we are to meet these challenges and improve the quality of students’ learning experience, particularly in the first year of study, then we need to engage students in a learning partnership. Ramsden advocates that “Student involvement in quality processes should start from the idea of building learning communities. Practically speaking, this involves shaping student expectations of their role as responsible partners who are able to take ownership of quality enhancement with staff and engage with them in dialogue about improving assessment, curriculum and teaching.”<sup>6</sup> Universities are therefore being asked to attract and retain students by providing an enhanced student experience that ensures they graduate to become successful, productive citizens.<sup>7</sup> Central to achieving this is the idea of student engagement. Trowler asserts that “if student engagement can deliver in its promises, it could hold the magic wand of making all of this possible”.<sup>8</sup>

In 2010 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) commissioned a literature review to provide a more holistic overview of what is meant by student engagement.<sup>9</sup> The review recognised that there was no single definition of engagement, but suggested an inclusive definition that reflected more than just involvement or participation, but required “feelings and sense making as well as activity”.<sup>10</sup> In the HEA Review the characteristics of the term “student engagement” are further defined as being “concerned with the interaction between time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and their performance, and reputation of the institution”.<sup>11</sup> The responsibility for student engagement

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<sup>4</sup>Ramsden, *supra* n. 3, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Ramsden, *supra* n. 3, p. 3. This variety includes “students with caring responsibilities, students who are less well prepared academically, less able, or less independent as learners, students living at home, students working significant hours off-campus in paying jobs, students with a disability, students learning in the workplace, international students whose first language is not English, and so on”.

<sup>6</sup>Ramsden, *supra* n. 3, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup>Vicki Trowler, *Student Engagement Literature Review* (York, Higher Education Academy, 2010) p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>Trowler, *supra* n. 7, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup>Trowler, *supra* n. 7. The review surveys literature from diverse perspectives, including student feedback, student representation, approaches to learning, and learning development.

<sup>10</sup>Trowler, *supra* n. 7, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup>Trowler, *supra* n. 7, p. 3.

thus lies with both individual students and their institutions.<sup>12</sup> It requires “quality of effort” both on the part of students to participate in activities developed for them and also for institutions to consider the needs of their students and respond accordingly. On the basis of this review the HEA published its *Framework for Action: Enhancing Student Engagement at the Institutional Level*.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this paper we are focusing on the Developmental Model of Student Engagement (DMSE) identified in the *Framework for Action*. This model “locates students as partners in a learning community, and is based on constructivist notions of learning such as the co-creation of knowledge by learners and teachers”.<sup>14</sup> This model: “places greater emphasis on student growth and development, and is primarily concerned with the quality of learning and the personal, mutual and social benefits that can be derived from engaging within a community of scholars”.<sup>15</sup>

This article evaluates the implementation of a peer support scheme as a means of promoting student engagement and enhancing the first year experience. Drawing on existing literature and original empirical research conducted at the University of Ulster, it addresses key themes in student engagement, including the management of the first year experience to ensure that the degree programme is delivered in a way that both engages and empowers new students.<sup>16</sup> The article therefore evaluates the use of peer support as a means of encouraging student engagement specifically targeted at first year law students. This evaluation focuses on three key outcomes of the project: aiding the transition from school to university; fostering a sense of belonging within the university; and improving student learning and enhancing student confidence in their subject.

Section one will place the project in the broader context of student transition and the impact that failure to make the transition from school to higher education can have on student engagement and therefore performance. Section two will then consider the ways in which Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) can be used to aid the transition to higher education by fostering a learning community within the first year cohort. Section three will evaluate the success of PASS as a means of facilitating transition and thus strengthening student engagement with core law modules. This will be done in light of the dual aims of fostering a sense of belonging within the School of Law itself and also increasing confidence in the subject matter. Finally section four will discuss some of the key challenges faced during the project and

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<sup>12</sup>Hamish Coates, “The Value of Student Engagement for Higher Education Quality Assurance” (2005) 11 *Quality in Higher Education* 25, at p. 26.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Trowler and Vicki Trowler, *Framework for Action: Enhancing Student Engagement at the Institutional Level* (York, Higher Education Academy, 2010).

<sup>14</sup>Trowler and Trowler, *supra* n. 13, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup>Trowler and Trowler, *supra* n. 13, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Fiona Black and Jane MacKenzie, *Quality Enhancement Themes: Peer Support in the First Year* (Scotland, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008) p. 2.

consider the further research questions presented by the project. The focus of the paper is therefore on student engagement. The question of the relationship between peer assisted learning and academic performance at Ulster is evaluated elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

The key salient theme, which is as applicable today as it was when first promulgated 30 years ago, is that students need to be successfully integrated and engaged within their institution both academically and socially. They need to feel a "sense of belonging"<sup>18</sup>. It is our contention that peer support and the use of PASS can aid engagement with the institution and empower students by creating a "learning community".

### The problem of transition

Student transition is defined as the moment when a student moves from school to university. It has remained a problematic issue within the realm of higher education. Research and statistics<sup>19</sup> suggest that students find it difficult to make the transition from a highly structured learning environment (school) to one where they must take responsibility for their own learning and progress (university).<sup>20</sup> It is evident that starting university can be a very daunting and overwhelming experience. The key challenge for higher education institutions appears to be how can we make students' experience at university more pleasant and welcoming? How do we encourage a sense of belonging?

The University of Ulster Teaching and Learning Strategy<sup>21</sup> identifies research by Yorke and Longden<sup>22</sup> which suggests that teaching and learning strategies should be oriented to enhance the experience of all students, albeit with a particular emphasis on first year, first semester students. Within the School of Law we have been faced with several problems such as high failure rates in certain modules, a high attrition rate and perceived student disengagement. It is claimed that in order to enhance retention and success we

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<sup>17</sup>Melanie Giles, Joan Condell and Amanda Zacharopoulou, "Peer Assisted Study Sessions: The Evaluation of a Cross-Faculty Initiative in Ulster, Perspectives on Pedagogy and Practice" (2012) 3 *Perspectives on Pedagogy and Practice* p. 67.

<sup>18</sup>Black and MacKenzie, *supra* n. 16, p. 3. For further discussion see Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (2nd ed, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993) and Vincent Tinto, *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>19</sup>The article draws on the results of primary research carried out by the University of Ulster, School of Law.

<sup>20</sup>See also Alison Bone, "The Twenty-first Century Law Student" (2009) 43 *Law Teacher* 222, at p. 238 which highlights the disparity between teaching and learning at school compared to in higher education.

<sup>21</sup>University of Ulster. "Teaching and Learning Strategy 2008/09–2012/13", available at <http://www.ulster.ac.uk/tls/tls2008-13.pdf> (accessed 10 February 2012).

<sup>22</sup>Mantz Yorke and Bernard Longden, *The First Year Experience in Higher Education in the UK* (York, Higher Education Academy, 2008).

need to discover what our students really want, identify their needs and adapt accordingly.<sup>23</sup> Kember, Lee and Li claim that "it is only through a holistic evaluation of the initial student experience that good practice can be highlighted and aspects that need improvement discovered".<sup>24</sup> In the 2009/2010 academic year we thus conducted a "First Year Review" which identified that whilst students' expectations of a law degree were generally being met there were significant issues that merited attention, namely the fact that students were struggling with the independent nature of a law degree and the demands placed on them by staff who failed to comprehend the level of anxiety in the first year. The School placed significant value on identifying the concerns of the first year students and it was in this context that we embarked on the pilot project outlined in this paper.

In the School of Law at Ulster the curriculum is kept under periodic review. In the 2009/2010 academic year the course team engaged in a review of the first year student experience, the assessment regime and learning outcomes for the first year. There appeared to be anecdotal evidence which suggested that first year students were having difficulty in their transition throughout year one with particular emphasis on the core law modules required by the professions. This was further supported by the fact that certain modules within the first year were increasingly deemed to be "at risk", i.e. had an annual failure rate at the first attempt of over 15%.<sup>25</sup> Law students are expected to be among the most able and confident of all students. Typically law courses have high asking grades and the expectation that this creates is that students entering their first year will be self-motivated and confident learners who should be able to cope with the demands of learning law. However, law is also one of the most independent degrees a student can undertake. Contact time and face-to-face teaching is low for most law students and this may compound the anxieties students may have when starting university. The consistently high failure rates and poor attendance records also caused disillusionment for staff. It was apparent that there was an "expectation gap" between staff expectations of what students were capable of doing and student expectations of the level of support that would be given to them in undertaking their degree. Thus the aim of the review was therefore to design, administer and analyse a study of first year law undergraduates with a view to establishing:

- first year student expectations in respect of their course of study
- first year student expectations in respect of the skills required for successful completion

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<sup>23</sup> Anne Pitkethly and Michael Prosser, "The First Year Experience Project: A Model for University-Wide Change" (2001) 20 *Higher Education Research and Development* 185.

<sup>24</sup> D. Kember, K. Lee and N. Li, "Cultivating a Sense of Belonging in Part-time Students" (2001) 20 *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 326-341 at p. 339 cited in Black and MacKenzie, *supra* n. 16, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> At Ulster, modules with a failure rate in excess of 15% are automatically deemed to be "at risk" and thus require further investigation in terms of assessment and student support.

- if and to what extent there is a divergence between the expectations of students and those of the course team/School/Faculty/University
- how any divergence can be addressed to ensure a robust and reliable regime which is capable of enhancing rather than undermining deep learning.

Within the review of the first year curriculum there was a clear focus on enhancement of the student experience.<sup>26</sup> The School believed that an informed understanding of student expectations would enable specific needs to be identified and addressed with a view to enhancing the student experience, thereby enhancing the quality of the degree programmes and ultimately having a beneficial impact upon the legal profession.

As part of the Review existing first and second year students were surveyed. The aim of the survey was to identify issues with the delivery of problematic law modules that could be addressed by providing a more supported learning experience. Whilst only a snapshot is provided here, the comments received in the course of the review demonstrated overwhelmingly that students had difficulty not so much with the actual material, but in coping with the way in which the programme was delivered. Many of them did not appear to understand the nature of a university education and appeared to require more basic assistance in the transition from school to university. Examples of general comments received included:

- Too much independent study is required.
- There is insufficient explanation of how to study.
- Too much reading is expected.
- There are not enough pointers on how to read textbooks.
- Involves more critical thinking than was expected.
- Expected the course to be simpler.
- Expected a lot more input from teachers.
- A lot of work must be done outside class time.

These comments demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of third level education, highlighting the identified difficulty that students faced in making the transition from a highly structured learning environment into one where they must take responsibility for their own progress. The problems that this appeared to be presenting were that students were becoming disillusioned with their course of study. Where they felt they were unable to keep up with the level of study required they simply disengaged from the subject. Attendance at seminars fell and performance in assessment reflected this

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<sup>26</sup>This review by the School was particularly apt in light of the Ramsden Report which had identified the need for institutions to respond to evolving student expectations. See Ramsden, *supra* n. 3.



lack of engagement. There is thus a direct link between transition and engagement. The process of transition is crucial in fostering confidence in first year students in terms of both adapting to a less structured learning environment as well as learning new skills. If this is not successfully managed then the student is likely to struggle. As a result of the first year review, a number of remedial measures were taken to address these perceived difficulties including the redesign of various aspects of the curriculum. The development of PASS was part of this work by attempting to introduce a more collective element into the study of law. It was hoped that PASS would encourage greater interaction between students at an early stage and thus promote peer learning and a greater level of engagement both with the School and with the subject.<sup>27</sup>

### Why PASS?

It is widely recognised that ever increasing demands are being placed on academic staff to continually improve teaching quality whilst at the same time coping with fewer resources and an increasingly diverse student population. It is in this context that peer tutoring in one form or another has attracted considerable interest.<sup>28</sup> Many terms are used synonymously (peer tutoring/peer support/peer assisted learning) to describe the use of more able or more experienced students to help less able or less experienced students to learn. It is difficult to give just one definition of peer tutoring and in this paper we are referring to the model of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), adapted from the US model of Supplemental Instruction (SI) which originated at the University of Missouri Kansas City (UKMC) in 1975. Its use is now widespread in the States and UK universities are increasingly using some form of peer tutoring/support.<sup>29</sup>

More often than not peer support is viewed as supplemental to teaching activities and is often perceived as targeting those students who are "at risk", i.e. those most likely to fail or leave university. Whilst this is true to a certain extent of our own project we are also conscious of the more salient issues of transition and student engagement. Black and MacKenzie argue that for peer support to be effective it "must be part of the fabric of the institution and be seen by students as a mainstream practice, which is there to enhance the student experience".<sup>30</sup> This, however, requires significant investment in terms of time and resources. Most peer support schemes will clearly identify whether the

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<sup>27</sup>For discussion of a "whole-of-course" response to the first year experience see Sally Kift, "Organising First Year Engagement Around Learning: Formal and Informal Curriculum Intervention", in Duncan Nulty and Noel Meyers (eds), *8th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference Proceedings*, 14–16 July 2004, Melbourne, Victoria (2008). This article on redesigning the curriculum identifies that whilst law staff may feel that this presents an answer to transition problems what students actually want is a much more personal touch.

<sup>28</sup>See Keith Topping, "The Effectiveness of Peer Tutoring in Further and Higher Education: A Typology and Review of the Literature" (1996) 32 *Higher Education* 321.

<sup>29</sup>Topping, *supra* n. 28, p. 330.

<sup>30</sup>Black and MacKenzie, *supra* n. 16, p. 11.

primary focus of the scheme is for “survival” or “success”. Black and MacKenzie advocate that peer support can offer something more than just tools for survival; it can also “offer the opportunity to develop skills and attributes that will enhance students’ lives beyond the subject of study . . . and thus enhance their success both at university and in wider society”.<sup>31</sup> Traditionally PASS would be used to provide targeted support for students on modules which were known to be particularly challenging for students with resultant high failure rates.<sup>32</sup> PASS thus has a predominant focus on academic achievement.<sup>33</sup> However, significant developments have taken place in the field of peer learning and it is now recognised that “social and emotional gains now attract as much interest as cognitive gains”.<sup>34</sup>

To date research has deemed that PASS can play a major role in enabling universities to fulfil Dearing’s goals.<sup>35</sup> In particular, Donelan and Wallace have suggested that peer assistance “supports academic teaching, enhances the students’ learning experience, reduces attrition and most important of all enables the students to develop confidence with the subject” they have chosen to undertake.<sup>36</sup> Black and MacKenzie go further than this by suggesting that rather than viewing peer support as simply a response mechanism that will enhance knowledge or skills in a particular subject, we should view it as “potentially transformative”.<sup>37</sup>

### **Implementing PASS @ Ulster**

The University of Ulster Teaching and Learning Strategy<sup>38</sup> states, *inter alia*, that the mission of the university is to provide excellent learning opportunities that are student centred. This mission is underpinned by four key strategic aims, the first of which is to enhance the quality of the student learning experience. This is further broken down into key supporting objectives. These are characterised by a commitment to student-centred teaching, learning and assessment; provision of a safe yet challenging learning environment and the opportunity for students to learn with and from their peers. Within this strategy there is

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<sup>31</sup>Black and MacKenzie, *supra* n. 16, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup>At Ulster we are no exception with the PASS scheme first being introduced in Maths where it was clear students were struggling with key concepts and underperforming in certain modules which were consequently deemed “at risk”. See Joan Condell and Y. Pratheepan, “Evaluation of Peer-Assisted Learning in Mathematics (PALM) for Second-Year Undergraduate Mathematics” (2010) 1 *Perspectives on Pedagogy and Practice* 1.

<sup>33</sup>This stems from the legacy of the SI model where the peer tutor is akin to a surrogate teacher and should be selected from the best students – the most academically able.

<sup>34</sup>Keith J. Topping, “Trends in Peer Learning” (2005) 25 *Educational Psychology* 631–645, at p. 631.

<sup>35</sup>Topping, *supra* n. 34.

<sup>36</sup>Maureen Donelan and Jenni Wallace, “Peer Support Programmes – A Truly Co-operative Initiative”, in John Dolan and Andrew J. Castley (eds), *Students Supporting Students* (SEDA Paper 105, Staff and Educations Development Association Birmingham, 1998) p. 12.

<sup>37</sup>Black and MacKenzie, *supra* n. 16, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup>University of Ulster, “Teaching and Learning Strategy 2008/09-2012/13”, available at <http://www.ulster.ac.uk/tls/tls2008-13.pdf> (accessed 10 February 2012).

also explicit recognition of the role that peer support can play in supporting learning.<sup>39</sup>

The idea of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) has been central to the University of Ulster's initiatives to support student learning for a number of years. The Scheme was introduced initially in 2009 in Maths<sup>40</sup> and subsequently rolled out to Psychology and Law in 2010.<sup>41</sup> This paper reports on the evaluation of a two-year project within the School of Law.

To establish the PASS system in law the first year students were divided into groups. Each group was assigned two PASS leaders. The groups were based on the students' normal seminar group of 15 students. Leaders had been recruited and trained in their role as leaders. Ten leaders were recruited to facilitate five groups as group leaders generally work in pairs. Applications for the leadership role were sought on a voluntary basis. There was no formal selection process or criteria applied; in particular academic performance was not made a strict criterion.<sup>42</sup> This decision was made on the basis that the purpose of the sessions was to allow first year students to learn from the experiences of the more senior students. For some this may have included experiencing difficulty with study skills or receiving disappointing examination results. It also reflected the underlying principle of PASS that the senior students are expected not to engage in academic tuition, but rather to facilitate peer learning between the first year students themselves. The role of the leaders is to liaise with the group to agree topics for discussion and to ensure the session is clearly structured. The leaders had been trained in techniques to use for structuring the sessions and to facilitate small group discussion. The PASS sessions were available to all students registered for Introduction to Law. Each PASS session was timetabled for one hour a week at a time likely to suit students.<sup>43</sup> The sessions took the form of small group facilitation. Students would compare notes and deadlines, clarify issues, critique, question and seek verification of ideas. These additional informal and confidential sessions did not replace lectures or seminars but were designed to supplement them. Ongoing support was provided to the PASS leaders through weekly debriefing sessions with the module co-ordinator and the Law Academic Co-ordinator for PASS.<sup>44</sup> This weekly meeting also provided a forum for PASS leaders to raise any difficulties students had been experiencing with the module.

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<sup>39</sup>One of the named objectives of the strategy is to "provide opportunities for (peer) supplemental instruction targeted at high risk modules/and or courses". University of Ulster, *supra* n. 38, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup>Condell and Pratheepan, *supra* n. 32.

<sup>41</sup>An evaluation across all three disciplines can be found in Giles *et al.*, *supra* n. 17.

<sup>42</sup>This can be contrasted with the position in Psychology where the number of applications for the positions meant that a competitive selection process had to be established.

<sup>43</sup>PASS leaders also communicated with their groups via email or Facebook and made themselves available to the first year students outside the dedicated PASS sessions.

<sup>44</sup>The academic co-ordinator, Amanda Zacharopoulou, is accredited through the UK National Centre for PASS at Manchester University and oversees the running of PASS within the School of Law and liaises with the Academic Co-ordinators in the other disciplines within the University.

The concept of PASS contains various different elements and targets. One characteristic of PASS is learning which involves gaining new "knowledge and/or skill experience or teaching".<sup>45</sup> PASS attempts to promote and enhance the learning experience by providing students with the opportunity to compare notes, clarify what they have read, analyse, question and seek verification of their ideas. In summary, PASS establishes a supportive environment by enabling deeper conceptual understanding of fundamental academic principles and increasing individual confidence rather than fostering superficial strategic learning to pass exams. Academics have advocated that the idea of PASS is a crucial element of supportive intervention to aid student transition from the school to university.<sup>46</sup>

In the first phase of the pilot project in 2010/2011 focus groups were conducted with PASS attendees. The qualitative findings highlight the positive benefits of PASS and provide a sense of how it is helping students to clarify their learning. Using qualitative feedback from these focus groups, the following section explores how PASS provided opportunities for students to build supportive networks, to ask questions, make mistakes and build up confidence. In this way PASS appeared to promote the three aspects of engagement identified by Trowler: behavioural, emotional and cognitive.<sup>47</sup> Trowler suggests that if these three dimensions are present then students would be expected to be behaviourally engaged, in that they attend and take part in classes; emotionally engaged, in terms of developing interest, enjoyment and a sense of belonging; and finally cognitively engaged, in that they would be invested in their learning.

When viewed in these terms there are a number of key features of PASS that make it particularly suitable for first year students.

### *1. Adapting to university life*

The concept of peer support has been defined as "the role other students play in a student's academic learning, social well-being and familiarization with the institution".<sup>48</sup> The use of the student peer group as a facilitator of learning for students is particularly appropriate where students are new to higher education. Research has suggested that peer assistance appeals more to new students because it supports "the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals and matched companions".<sup>49</sup> The scheme operates on a horizontal axis in that first year students learn with and from each other and to a lesser extent, a vertical axis as

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<sup>45</sup>Keith Topping and Stewart Ehly, "Introduction to Peer-Assisted Learning", in Topping and Ehly (eds), *Peer-Assisted Learning* (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998) p. 1.

<sup>46</sup>John Hammond, Christine P. Bithell, Lester Jones and Penelope Bidgood, "A First Year Experience of Student-Directed Peer-Assisted Learning" (2010) 11 *Active Learning in Higher Education* 201.

<sup>47</sup>Trowler, *supra* n. 7, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup>Trowler, *supra* n. 7, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup>Topping, *supra* n. 34, p. 631.

more senior students facilitate the learning process.<sup>50</sup> The dual horizontal and vertical aspects of PASS mean that students are encouraged not only to get to know their own peer group but also to interact with senior students who can share their experience of higher education with them. Our research has suggested that this is one of the key benefits of PASS for first year students. This applies particularly to the process of adapting to university life. Older students are arguably better equipped to support first year students in making the transition than academic staff.<sup>51</sup> This is also borne out in research by Moust and Schmidt, who found that: "students felt peer tutors were better than staff tutors at understanding their problems, were more interested in their lives and personalities . . .".<sup>52</sup> In essence, many found it easier to relate to a peer than to an academic. PASS provides a pathway for higher year students to pass on their experiences of their first year to new students. This contextualises the university setting for new students and enables them to learn from real and recent experiences.<sup>53</sup>

The PASS sessions also offer a forum for students to meet each other. First year students can feel isolated by the independent nature of university study. Providing additional contact hours in the first year can help to foster connections between students themselves and a connection between the student and the university.<sup>54</sup> For example, helping students to work with each other and communicate can be encouraged by the use of icebreakers.<sup>55</sup> It could be suggested that these are vital for enabling students to ease into unknown surroundings and combining icebreakers with the informal environment PASS promotes is an effective way to aid student transition. Research has also suggested that the informal environment has been pivotal to the success of PASS. For example, Capstick found that students valued "the informality and opportunity for openness afforded by PAL sessions".<sup>56</sup> This is reflected in our own

<sup>50</sup>For an explanation of the horizontal and vertical aspects of peer support see Black and MacKenzie, *supra* n. 16.

<sup>51</sup>One student commented that "You can relate to them because usually like a lecturer or seminar leader are that much older than you but they have went [sic] through the same experience as you just last year so they sort of had experienced the same problems".

<sup>52</sup>Jos H.C. Moust and Henk G. Schmidt, "Facilitating Small-group Learning: A Comparison of Student and Staff Tutors' Behavior" (1994) 22 *Instructional Science* 287–301 cited in Topping, *supra* n. 28, p. 325.

<sup>53</sup>This seems to apply to a range of different issues, for example one student commented, "Yes they like tell you revision things, just like one week they give us notes on how to take notes from cases. And just being there to tell us not to panic about stuff and not to worry about the exams, when to start revising and what to expect. How lecturers operate, and to be given tips on things like that is really helpful."

<sup>54</sup>Alison Bone found that a large majority of students felt that face-to-face contact with other students in a classroom or similar setting was an essential part of the learning environment for students. See Bone, *supra* n. 20, p. 238.

<sup>55</sup>Icebreakers are defined as a facilitation exercise intended to help a group begin the process of forming themselves into a team.

<sup>56</sup>Stuart Capstick, "Implementing Peer Assisted Learning in Higher Education: The Experience of a New University and a Model for the Achievement of a Mainstream Programme", paper prepared

research with students stating that, "It is a friendly environment, you feel comfortable at PASS, you are able to ask questions". PASS embraces an open to all policy and encourages all students to participate. In this way it is implemented as a framework to enable students to support each other,<sup>57</sup> thereby easing the transition and fostering a deeper engagement both with the university and with the course of study.

## 2. *Developing study skills*

PASS sessions should focus both on the learning process and on content. This enables PASS to address issues relating to study skills (for example note taking) as well as content which is proving difficult for students. It can help support students in those first few weeks when they are feeling overwhelmed with the demands of university study. Academic staff often expect new students to have the skills and ability to be able to undertake independent study and may be dismissive, albeit unintentionally, of students' anxieties. However, PASS can provide key support in this transition process.<sup>58</sup>

At Ulster PASS was initially attached to Introduction to Law, a core module which all law students must undertake in semester one of the first year. We felt that this was the most appropriate module to attach PASS to as this module aims to develop the skills needed to study law and provides the underpinning necessary for the study of all other law modules on the degree. The rationale for attaching PASS to this module was thus to provide dedicated support for the students at a time when they would most need it. The results from the First Year Review had clearly indicated that students did not understand how to be a successful law student and attaching PASS to the introductory module was a strategic decision. It was designed to facilitate engagement and foster supportive networks amongst the first year students and in turn alleviate their anxieties about the study of law.

One issue that is particularly pertinent to student transition is the directed study versus independent study dichotomy. Whereas directed study is used during the students' school years, universities attempt to empower the student by providing them with the opportunity to control their own learning. However limited oversight often leads to a lack of understanding of what is expected.<sup>59</sup> One of the main reasons for the lack of understanding stems from

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for the Peer Assisted Learning Conference (2004) p. 6, available at <http://pal.bournemouth.ac.uk/documents/implmntng%20pal%20article61.pdf> (accessed 20 June 2012).

<sup>57</sup>Black and MacKenzie, *supra* n. 16, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup>One student commented: "I thought it was really helpful . . . with coursework. I found in the first two weeks of term the academic staff obviously don't have a lot of time to go over the basics – like how reading lists work, your seminar preparations, and things like that. Whereas in here it's the perfect opportunity like with coursework and things, not just the content of things but how you structure it, the front cover, word count, candidate number, like the logistics of it".

<sup>59</sup>One student commented that PASS had been valuable because " . . . you get an idea of how to plan an essay and what to include, especially in your first year in the first couple of weeks you don't really know how to structure essays for law so it's very beneficial".

the students' inability to adjust to the responsibility of structuring their own learning. Research has advocated that this dramatic change to self-directed learning is unacceptable. For example, Tinto has argued that "universities must provide faculties with the pedagogical and assessment skills they need to establish conditions in their classrooms that promote student involvement, learning and retention of information".<sup>60</sup> Assertions such as this suggest that universities have responsibility to ensure students progress and cannot solely rely on individual student motivation to independently study.

PASS can address transition, and by extension, engagement issues by encouraging students to work with each other, by teaching them about self-discipline and how to manage their own learning and by engaging in continual assessment through session exercises. The students must learn how to self-measure their performance within the formal spectrum of university. University of Ulster research suggests that PASS can help with informing students of the level of commitment required for them to fulfil their academic potential at university. Owing to the need for equity there is little opportunity for the student to gain feedback prior to the formal submission of their assessments and it is this gap that PASS is aimed at addressing and helping to aid a "learning community". It could be argued that PASS is the medium required and that it is equitable. First, it is open to all students and therefore no student can be disadvantaged in any way. Secondly, it is optional, meaning students are free to choose their path in university without being penalised. For example, some students prefer to work on their own and develop their arguments through individual thought and rationale. The idea of PASS being optional also protects the students who do not feel that PASS can benefit them.

### 3. *Increasing confidence in law*

Although the role of PASS is not to replace academic tuition, and student leaders should be facilitators and not lecturers, PASS also has benefits in terms of increasing student confidence and engagement with the subject matter. This is particularly the case with modules where students disengage because of the perceived difficulty of the subject.

In the second semester of the first year PASS sessions were attached to the Introduction to Property Law module. The value of PASS for Introduction to Property Law lay in creating a space for students to discuss new and sometimes difficult concepts without the fear of embarrassment that many would feel speaking in a seminar.<sup>61</sup> This is particularly true of property law where

<sup>60</sup>V. Tinto, "Establishing Conditions for Student Success", paper prepared for the 11th Annual Conference of the European Access Network Monash University, Italy (2002) p. 7, available at <http://faculty.soe.syr.edu/vtinto/Files/European%20Access%20Network%202002%20Keynote.pdf> (accessed 11 February 2012).

<sup>61</sup>One student commented that "... you can ask your PASS leader questions that you may not specifically want to or feel comfortable asking your lecturer. They are always really helpful, pointing you in the right direction". Similarly, another student suggested, "You can ask questions that you



students need to learn new terms and concepts that are unfamiliar to them. It was also hoped that engagement with PASS would translate into improved seminar attendance through increasing students' confidence in their ability to understand the subject and interact with the tutor and the class. "Face-to-face" contact with other students has been identified as integral to the student learning environment,<sup>62</sup> and a project of this nature allows for a structured form of interaction between tutor, senior student and student which increases the support available to students in a manner that is not always possible given time and teaching constraints.<sup>63</sup>

While the PASS project in the School of Law had primarily been aimed at facilitating the transition to university, it was felt that there was potential for benefits in terms of subject matter confidence as well. PASS sessions aimed to promote critical enquiry and reflection and build confidence through encouraging students to orally articulate what they know about their subjects.<sup>64</sup> Crucially these sessions are student led and address specific difficulties that students have experienced in their own study and students are clearly placing value on the extent to which PASS can aid their understanding of the subject.<sup>65</sup> Property law is traditionally a difficult subject, and one with which students struggle. It is regarded by some academics as outdated as it engages in the use of archaic terms along with concepts that have little relevance to the modern world.<sup>66</sup> Exam results and coursework performance suggested that first year students found this difficult to adapt to.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, the law attendance figures have demonstrated that students have struggled to engage with the module. With property law being a subject with its own conceptual framework and language, failure to attend classes will normally translate into poor exam performance. Statistics showed that students were disillusioned with the subject and the University of Ulster has attempted to reverse this problem through PASS. With the right environment, property law can be engaging and its doctrinal nature also means that if skills are effectively developed it is a subject which can help to foster an identity of "self as law student" amongst the students, given its specialised nature and vocabulary. By attaching PASS sessions to this module it was hoped that the peer support mechanism established in the first

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wouldn't normally ask your lecturer because they might think that you are a bit silly for asking them".

<sup>62</sup>See Bone, *supra* n. 20.

<sup>63</sup>Bone, *supra* n. 20.

<sup>64</sup>This was borne out in student feedback: "It is an environment where you can work together to enhance your learning on the topic" and "It is enjoyable too, it gives you the chance to go deeper into your modules and learn it in detail".

<sup>65</sup>Student feedback suggested that "the PASS sessions were all sort of geared towards us, what we wanted to work on or what we had problems with".

<sup>66</sup>Michael Weir, "Ways to Make the Teaching of Property Law/Land Law More Interesting" (2007) 11 *Journal of South Pacific Law* 107.

<sup>67</sup>In the academic year 2009/2010 the failure rate for this module was 45% at first attempt.



semester could contribute more substantively to engagement with core law modules.

### Evaluation: the "PASS" effect

Black and MacKenzie contend that students need to be successfully integrated into higher education from both a social and an academic perspective, and this has formed the basis of the PASS project in Law at Ulster. Drawing on much of Tinto's work which is central to the issues of student retention and student engagement they argue "that peer support can, in the right circumstances, contribute to students' social and academic integration".<sup>68</sup> They also contend that "interaction with peers can aid engagement with the institution through the motivational aspects of experiencing a 'sense of belonging'".<sup>69</sup> Student engagement has been defined by Hu and Kuh as "the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute to desired outcomes".<sup>70</sup> Cognisant of this we wanted to explore the extent to which students were participating in PASS and to identify if PASS was helping students to feel legitimated and supported by the creation of a learning community, both key facets of student engagement.<sup>71</sup>

Further evaluation was then conducted. In a climate where non-attendance at lectures and tutorials appears to be a growing trend, there is a need to more fully explore students' motivations to engage with the learning environment and to identify the reasons why some students are reluctant to expend the "quality of effort" that is required.<sup>72</sup> In this way, it might be possible to shape the future delivery of programmes to more accurately reflect the needs of students which seems to be particularly important amidst the claims that students are too often presented as the customers of engagement as opposed to the co-authors.<sup>73</sup> Statistical analysis further supports the claims made by individual students in the focus groups.

In 2011/2012 we distributed a questionnaire across all three disciplines operating PASS at Ulster (Law, Psychology and Maths) to enable us to more fully explore students' motivations to engage with the PASS process and in particular, to identify the reasons why some of our perhaps less able students are reluctant to expend the "quality of effort" that is required to attend PASS regularly. Students were asked to identify themselves as either occasional attendees (one to four sessions) or regular attendees (between five and eight sessions, or

<sup>68</sup>Black and MacKenzie, *supra* n. 16, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup>Black and MacKenzie, *supra* n. 16, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup>Shouping Hu and George Kuh, "Being (Dis)Engaged in Educationally Purposeful Activities: The Influences of Student and Institutional Characteristics" (2002) 43 *Research in Higher Education* 555.

<sup>71</sup>Hamish Coates, "A Model of Online and General Campus-Based Student Engagement" (2007) 32 *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 121.

<sup>72</sup>Hu and Kuh, *supra* n. 70.

<sup>73</sup>Ramsden, *supra* n. 3, p. 7.

more). Fifty-three first year Law students completed the questionnaire out of a total cohort of 74. This was a response rate of 72%. Out of the 53 students 37 (70%) classified themselves as regular attendees. Fifteen (28%) were occasional attendees. One (2%) questionnaire was missing.

When asked "Do you think PASS was worthwhile?", the responses were as follows:

- yes – 38 students (71.7%), 35 of whom were regular attendees
- no – six students (11.3%), one of whom was an occasional attendee and two were regular attendees
- unsure – nine (17%), six of whom had never attended a PASS session and three who were occasional attendees.

Student motivation was thus a key aspect of the evaluation and we were interested in ascertaining how motivated students were to study in general and to attend PASS. We then looked at the results to see if there was any correlation between motivation to study in general and motivation to attend PASS. Students were asked "How motivated are you to attend PASS regularly?" with responses based on a scale of 1 to 7 with 1 indicating not at all motivated and 7 indicating very motivated. We took a response of above 4 to indicate motivation. Twenty-six students (51%) indicated that they were motivated with 11 (20.8%) of the respondents indicating they were "very motivated" to attend PASS regularly. When asked "How motivated are you to study generally?", 37 students (69.8%) declared they were motivated with only three (5.7%) indicating they were "very motivated".

With regard to study motivation occasional attendees had a mean score of 5.3750 and regular attendees a mean score of 4.9459. Whereas with regard to PASS motivation occasional attendees had a mean score of 2.5 and regular attendees a mean score of 5.2973. There does not therefore appear to be a direct correlation between those students who are motivated to study generally and those who are motivated to attend PASS regularly. It is clear that in terms of motivation more students were "very motivated" to attend PASS than to study generally. This suggests that from the student perspective PASS delivers added value to the university learning experience. Indeed there appears to be significant support for PASS from those who choose to attend. The most striking results can be seen from those who attend on a regular basis. One aspect of the questionnaire was to explore the overall experience and attitudes to PASS. Students were asked, for example, to indicate their agreement with statements about how they found PASS sessions and how they felt by the end of PASS sessions on a five-point Likert scale anchored "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Neutral", "Disagree", and "Strongly Disagree".

The results for regular attendees are shown below in percentages for how they found the PASS sessions:

		SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Enjoyable	45.9	40.5	8.1	5.4	
2	Intellectually stimulating/challenging	5.4	27	43.2	18.8	5.4
3	Intellectually easy/simplistic	29.7	43.2	21.6	5.4	
4	Satisfying to be able to complete answers	24.3	51.4	16.2	5.4	2.7
5	Valuable for assessment preparation	37.8	35.1	16.2	8.1	2.7
6	Confidence building in subject	32.4	43.2	13.5	10.8	
7	A good learning experience generally	37.8	43.2	10.8	5.4	2.7

In response to this question 75.6% of regular attendees either agreed or strongly agreed that PASS enabled confidence building in the subject. Occasional attendees did not seem to attach the same value to the sessions with only 37.5% agreeing that the sessions aided confidence building. Further 31.3% of these students remained neutral. Value was also placed on PASS as a means of enhancing learning with 76.7% of students indicating it was "satisfying to be able to complete answers". However, in terms of the intellectual aspect of PASS it is clear that the majority of students (72.9%) felt that it was "intellectually easy/simplistic" and only approximately a third (32.4%) felt that PASS was "intellectually stimulating/challenging".

Our findings show that students are participating in PASS and place significant value on PASS in the context of their learning experience. Harper and Quayle, however, point out that engagement requires more than just involvement or participation. It requires feelings and sense-making.<sup>74</sup> It is more than simply taking part in an activity; there must also be some sense of interest and enjoyment or sense of belonging. The results suggest that the overwhelming feature of PASS is a sense of enjoyment, an emotional aspect of engagement, with 86.4% of regular attendees claiming that the sessions were "enjoyable". Students were then asked to indicate how they felt by the end of PASS sessions. The questions were focused on the extent to which PASS increased their confidence and knowledge in their subject and the extent to which PASS dealt with transition issues. In response to this question 75.7% of regular attendees either agreed or strongly agreed that it made them more confident in their subject (see table below for responses from regular attendees). Occasional attendees seemed more ambivalent with only 18.8% agreeing that they felt more confident; 56.3% of these students remained neutral. With regard to all the regular attendees the responses below show that there are many benefits as a result of the initiative. Figures are in percentages.

From an academic perspective it is evident that PASS is enhancing the student learning experience and allowing students to develop confidence and

<sup>74</sup>S.R. Harper and S.J. Quayle (2009) cited in Trowler, *supra* n. 7, p. 5.

	By the end of PASS sessions I felt:	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	More confident in my subject.	13.5	62.2	18.9	5.4	
2	More knowledgeable in my subject.	10.8	62.2	18.9	5.4	2.7
3	More satisfied with my subject.	16.2	54.1	16.2	13.5	
4	More at home within my department.	18.9	45.6	21.6	13.5	
5	More at home within the university.	18.6	59.5	18.9	2.7	
6	More comfortable with my peers.	43.2	48.6	8.1		

knowledge in the subject and increasing student satisfaction with law. As well as academic benefits there is also clear evidence that PASS has a beneficial effect in terms of transition. The social aspects are evident with an overwhelming majority (91.8%) of regular attendees indicating that PASS made them feel more comfortable with their peers. The results show that PASS does encourage a "sense of belonging" and can assist students by providing a supportive learning environment. As well as cognitive gains there are significant emotional gains for those who engage in PASS. PASS clearly enriches the student experience for those who attend but what is it about PASS that motivates students to attend?

In the questionnaire students were given a list of seven aspects that summarise the positive advantages of PASS and asked to tick all that applied. When asked what they liked most about PASS students overwhelmingly (94.6%) claimed that it was the "less formal, comfortable and relaxed atmosphere, with the freedom to ask questions and no pressure to answer correctly". It is the freedom to make mistakes in a safe environment which attracts students to attend PASS. For first year law students significant value is also placed on interaction with their peers and being able to explore issues that are presenting problems for them: 75.7% of students claimed that "being able to discuss with peers the questions and get explanations for the answers" was what they liked most about PASS. It is clear that PASS is providing a supportive environment for students to communicate and learn from each other. These responses back up the comments made in the earlier focus groups: 64.9% of students said that the social aspect of PASS was what they liked most whereas only 43.2% indicated that what they liked most was that PASS "helped in learning and understanding the topics". This could be interpreted as students not feeling that this was the most important aspect of PASS for them.

Whilst we are encouraged to facilitate small group work at institutional level in order to facilitate communication and interaction this does not seem to be a crucial issue for students with only 32.4% claiming that "working in small groups" was the best aspect of PASS and 29.7% claiming they liked "one-to-one/face-to-face help". We had one disillusioned student who said there was "nothing" about PASS they liked best!

Access to more experienced peers and being able to relate to peers is one of the central features of PASS. The results from the questionnaire clearly show that the "quality" of the leaders is crucial to the success of scheme. Our findings also show that the attributes of the leaders are fundamental to enhancing the student experience. Students were asked to indicate whether their leaders were supportive, informed, considerate and encouraging on a five-point Likert scale anchored "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Neutral", "Disagree", and "Strongly Disagree". The results were very reassuring with the vast majority of students either strongly agreeing or agreeing that the leaders were supportive (97.3%); informed (81.1%); considerate (89.2%) and encouraging (94.6%). Clearly leader empathy towards the first years helps makes PASS a more rewarding experience. These findings further strengthen the conclusion that the space for social interaction and forging a learning community with both peers and senior students is a vital aspect of transition and engagement for first year students.

### Key challenges

While the results of the two-year study at Ulster suggest that PASS can help to promote student engagement through the creation of a learning community, Topping warns that "it would be unwise to seize upon peer tutoring as a universal, undifferentiated and instant panacea".<sup>75</sup> We must be mindful that it not simply a matter of selecting and training higher year students (leaders), putting them together with first year students and hoping for the best. We know peer tutoring works but only if it is properly organised and implemented well. Along with the positives of PASS there are also various challenges. One of the major challenges the University of Ulster has faced has been the level of student engagement as evidenced by the low occasional attendees. The students that attended regularly benefited from the sessions. However there was also a significant number of students who did not engage with the PASS sessions at all. In these circumstances it is difficult to make a claim that PASS can, in and of itself, contribute to broader goals such as student retention. In order to evaluate and move towards addressing this challenge we conducted a focus group with students who had decided not to engage with PASS.

On a very basic level, the low level of engagement was attributed by students themselves to laziness. Students felt that because the PASS sessions were not compulsory and attracted no academic credit that they did not need to stay for them.<sup>76</sup> This was combined with the fact that there was a gap of one hour between the first year lecture and the PASS sessions (sometimes referred to as twilight sessions). Many students stated that they simply did not wish

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<sup>75</sup>Topping, *supra* n. 28, p. 321.

<sup>76</sup>In the focus group conducted with students who did not attend PASS one student commented that "it isn't compulsory, it's not set in our timetable, you don't have to go . . .".

to wait around for an extra hour to go to the PASS sessions.<sup>77</sup> This had been presented in the focus groups as a factor that could prevent some students from attending PASS. This was backed up by the results of the questionnaire where 35.1% of students cited the time of day as what they liked least. This represents part of a broader and more structural difficulty faced when trying to address student engagement. Students tend to commute to the University and are not in the habit of remaining on campus to engage in independent study. Also many students are in part-time employment which restricts their freedom to spend longer hours at the campus. While these issues are beyond the control of the school, or of the university more broadly, they nevertheless have a significant impact on the success of a project such as PASS. The low numbers also impacted negatively on the experience of those who did attend PASS. Those who attended regularly expressed regret that more people had not been involved as this would have raised the quality of the discussion and of the overall experience.<sup>78</sup> However, some students felt that the low turnout meant that it was no longer worth engaging with the project and withdrew as a result.

More substantive issues were also raised over the nature of the PASS project and the relationship between peer support and academic guidance. For the students who attended the focus group and who had clear reasons for not attending the PASS sessions this was a more pressing issue than timetabling. This tension presented itself most clearly in relation to the role of the PASS leaders. PASS is intended first and foremost as a supplement to academic instruction. The role of the PASS leaders is to facilitate discussion within the group and not to provide academic tuition. Many students felt that this model worked for the first semester when they were new to university life and needed a supportive older student who could answer their practical questions.<sup>79</sup> However, when it came to the more substantive topic of Introduction to Property Law in the second semester, students felt that academic guidance would have been a more valuable contribution and as PASS leaders could not or would not provide such guidance students decided that PASS was no longer beneficial to their study.<sup>80</sup> This clearly highlights a tension between the original model of PASS (whereby academic tuition is precluded) and the needs of the students who expect guidance on difficult substantive topics. This is a tension that needs to be carefully considered in terms of how PASS can be developed to meet the academic needs of students without compromising the original aims of PASS. This also raises

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<sup>77</sup>"The time, it is quite late. We have a long break between our lecture and the PASS session, like a two hour break and people just go on home because they don't want to wait for PASS."

<sup>78</sup>One regular attendee commented that "it would be a lot more effective if there was more [sic] attendance . . .".

<sup>79</sup>This distinction was summarised by one student who commented that "At the start it was good because you were new to university and you didn't know any of the processes . . . so you could ask the PASS leaders and they would . . . tell you the answers and guide you on what to know. But on an academic level it wasn't that good."

<sup>80</sup>Another disillusioned student commented that "They said they couldn't give us the answers, which was really disappointing."

secondary issues related to the approach of PASS leaders to their task. For example as one student pointed out, "Looking back at last semester I think it took the PASS leaders a while to settle in as well and understand what way the PASS session was to work and what they were to do with us. Like the first couple of weeks were a bit drab and I think that is why the numbers dropped and people decided not to come anymore". Similarly the findings from the questionnaire suggest that the lack of academic content put some students off attending PASS sessions: 24.3% of respondents felt that too few sample questions and assessment topics were covered. This reinforces the findings from the focus groups and leads us to conclude that generally students seem to prefer a more structured approach.

Finally, it is clear from the results of the focus group that the quality of leadership was variable. This appears to be attributable to varying perceptions of the role of the PASS leader. While some leaders were highly commended for their efforts, there were allegations that others had been at best ambivalent, or worse had provided misleading information. Although attendance had generally been extremely good, focus group analyses suggested that lack of structure in some sessions and the limited effectiveness of some leaders may have deterred some students from attending their PASS sessions.<sup>81</sup> This clearly raises a significant issue of quality control, and highlights the need for a rigorous selection procedure for potential leaders. The variation in PASS leaders also helps to distinguish between supporting learning and providing academic guidance. Students, within the focus group, also suggested that structured academic content would have improved their experience of PASS. The question of where to draw the line between facilitating peer learning and providing academic tuition is the most significant challenge to come out of this project. The model of PASS does not envisage an academic role for the group leaders. However, the results of the focus groups suggest that students would prefer a more academically structured approach to the study sessions. This is a question that will require ongoing consideration in the context of peer assisted learning in law.

## **Conclusion**

Having explored the various problems universities face in relation to new students, it can be concluded that PASS can make a positive contribution to student transition and engagement. The problem of student transition can be eased through the use of PASS with its ability to "support academic teaching, enhance the student learning experience, reduce attrition and most important of all enable the students to develop confidence with the subject" they have

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<sup>81</sup> As one student commented, "I think it works well if it's done well if you know what I mean. If the leaders are doing what they are meant to be doing it works, but when they are just having a chat there isn't much point in going, you could do better on your own".

chosen to undertake.<sup>82</sup> It could be suggested that PASS can help by informing students of the level of commitment required for them to fulfil their academic potential at university and further contextualises the university setting.

The concept of PASS helps develop a student-centred approach to teaching and learning which promotes “teamwork, problem solving, negotiation, decision making and management of self and others”.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, PASS provides a safe, yet challenging learning environment that supports students to engage and learn alongside fellow students from diverse backgrounds and identities. The idea explicitly aims to widen participation by providing a support mechanism which is aimed at helping students stay in higher education. This fits in well with the School of Law’s aim to support student learning and promote the development of skills and attributes to strengthen students’ employability.<sup>84</sup> Students’ perceptions of their PASS experience and their group leader’s contribution revealed that first year law undergraduates found PASS a highly valuable learning experience. In particular, they found the less formal, comfortable and relaxed atmosphere of the PASS session provided them with greater freedom to ask questions and exerted less pressure on them to answer questions correctly than a more formal staff-led session. Students also found the sessions increased their understanding of weekly Law topics covered.

Finally, it is evident that PASS has the potential to have a positive impact within the university sphere. The main attribute PASS contains is its ability to aid the process of student transition. The increased level of performance is a secondary component. PASS undoubtedly faces challenges and is still an idea in progress. The challenges outlined demonstrate that PASS is by no means a perfect concept; however, it does have a positive contribution to make within the context of university study. This research has demonstrated that PASS can aid student transition effectively.

Universities need to keep to pace with students’ needs and expectations. Our findings demonstrate that PASS can help do this and serves a dual function – making students feel at home in the University, and also delivering results in terms of increased confidence in subject matter. PASS can be more than just a survival tool. There are significant social and emotional gains for those students who attend. The findings must not be overstated because of the relatively small sample involved but they are nonetheless significant. They confirm and reinforce the existing literature on the value of peer support, particularly in the context of first year transition. The evaluation affirms that when students “engage” the benefits for them are manifold. PASS allows those students who regularly attend to gain a sense of social cohesion with their peers and a “sense of belonging” within the law department. PASS is not a panacea, it is not a “magic wand” to all transition issues but as part of a

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<sup>82</sup>Donelan and Wallace, *supra* n. 36, p. 12.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup>McMahon, *supra* n. 2.



transition framework it provides an opportunity for first year students to learn with and from each other allowing them to develop as independent learners and become more confident in their subject whilst having fun. It provides help and support for contemporary first year students when they need it most.

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